THE STORY

OF THE

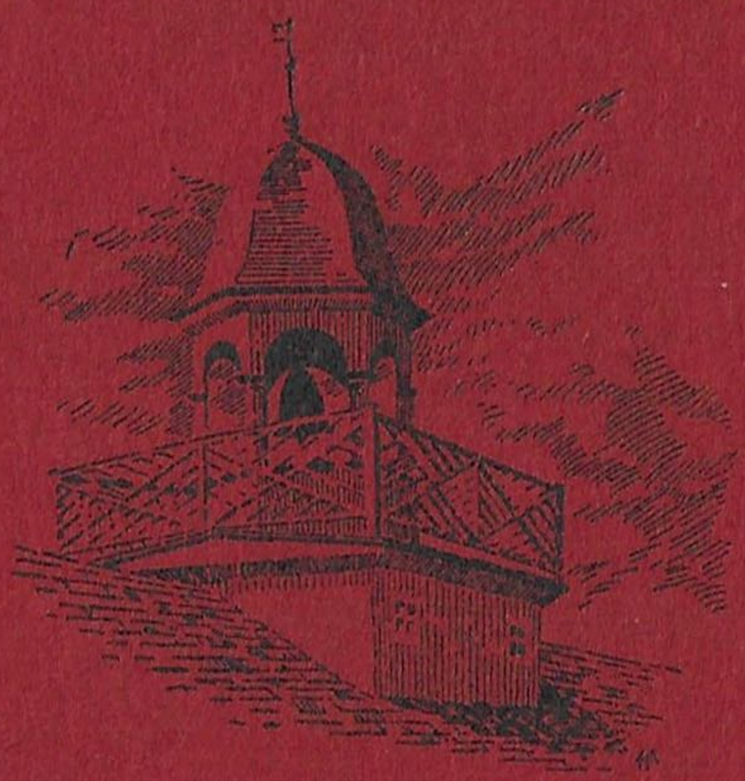
GEMEIN HAUS

WRITTEN BY

ELIZABETH L. MYERS

FOR THE

Watchful Circle of Kings' Daughters



Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

1924

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The first house in Bethlehem was a log cabin completed in March, 1741, and occupied in the same month. Plans were at once made for the erection of another and far more commodious building, the site for which was chosen on the hillside overlooking the Lehigh River. However, spring planting and summer harvesting had to be attended to, and the low-lying, fertile land down by the river was chosen for the sowing of the first crops. While hands were busy with hoe and spade to such an extent that by September 23 the planting of the winter grain was finished, minds were busy with building plans, and the preparatory steps toward actual construction were taken so that everyone could help with the erection of the new house when they were released from the work in the fields.

By September 27, 1741, the excavation of the second house of Bethlehem, to be known as the Gemein Haus, was completed, and scores of white oak logs, rafted down the Lehigh from the Mahoning Valley, lay piled in front of the site, ready to be built up into substantial walls.

The next day, Thursday, September 28, the cornerstone was laid at the southeast corner (now in the center of the building, as an addition was erected in 1743), and consecrated by Bishop Nitschmann and Andrew Eschenbach. George Neisser, the first schoolmaster, who possessed some facility with the pen, engrossed a document on parchment with the names of all those then living in the settlement and the text for the day. This document was placed in a pewter box and cemented into a cavity in the foundation stone, or "grundstein." Work progressed rapidly, but when Count Zinzendorf, the great patron of the Moravian Church, arrived from Saxony on December 21, 1741, the house was not quite finished, and rooms were hastily arranged for him and his suite on the second floor,

in the western end, the rooms so long familiar to us as the Mission Rooms.*

This first section of the building had only the one front door, the west door on Church Street. Finishing work was done on the building while the people were living in it, for they had been compelled to move in by the advance of winter in 1742, while floors and even chimneys were yet unfinished; so the long winter days were employed in the execution of all the details, such as wooden latches to the doors, etc. A small carpenter-shop had been hastily constructed in the rear for the protection of their tools and materials.

Within two years even this large house was found to be too small, and an addition was decided upon which was completed and occupied in August, 1743; the present eastern door gave access to the new part.

The name "Gemein Haus" was bestowed upon the dwelling-place of the Congregation;—(German, Gemeine) later, as other houses were built, this house became especially the residence of the clergy for many years.

The first pharmacy, not only in Bethlehem, but in the Lehigh Valley, was established in this house, in charge of Dr. Adolph Meyer, who had a corps of eight men and seven women as nurses, not only for the care of the sick, but to help him collect the healing herbs and roots for his primitive pharmacy. Very sick people were cared for in a small log cabin until the erection of the Married People's House when a few rooms were detailed for hospital use in that building, and a room was set aside in the Brethren's House as an infirmary.

The first school of Bethlehem was established in the Gemein Haus. Countess Benigna von Zinzendorf had started a small school for girls in Germantown and in June of 1742 she removed her establishment to Bethlehem where they were domiciled in the already crowded Gemein Haus.

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*This statement is made by Bishop Edmund de Schweinitz, on page 126, Vol. I, of the Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society.

After the completion of the new addition, in 1743, this girls' school was provided with a room for its use in the east wing, and is the beginning of the famous Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies.

The first place of worship in Bethlehem was the little chapel on the second floor of the Gemein Haus, running through from the front to the back. It was a large hall in the center of the building and was heated by a tile-stove set up in October, 1742. Here the prayer bands of the Hourly Intercession prayed for the salvation and welfare of the new settlement; the hours were rung on the Glocke Baum by the night watchman. The Glocke Baum was a large tree just outside the house on which was hung a large bell which served as a clock for a few years before the town clock was installed on the Bell House. Joachim Senseman was the first time-keeper and bell-ringer. He announced the hours for devotions, meals and labor.

Morning and evening prayer were conducted daily in this chapel, and all the Sabbath services. The order of life on Sunday was as follows:—Morning prayers, breakfast followed by the Haus Conferenz to arrange the work to be done the coming week,—German preaching,—dinner for residents and guests (for the Moravians furnished Sunday dinner to strangers and visitors who attended morning preaching in the very early days)—English preaching—catechization—an address by the Indian Wasamapah, also called Tschoop,—a sermon for afternoon callers—Bible expositions—one-fourth hour meetings by the different choirs—vesper service—evening meal—evening prayer for the single men—and customary hourly prayers until midnight.

The Haus-Conferenz met to plan the work for the coming week, for it was by such efficient team work that they accomplished the marvels of construction and administration which are our admiration to-day. Here is a program of work to be done in one week in 1750:—

1. The Dyer's Kettle to be set and the House to be finished. Tanneberger takes care of it.

2. A Place by the Fire of our Clothier's Press Room to be walled in.

3. Whenever Wall-nut Tres are cut down, the Bark and Root thereof to be carefully laid up for the Dyer.

4. Fire-wood to be brought in for Bro. Weiss that he may have a Stock thereof ready in Summer. Kremser.

5. Care to be taken that Bricks and Tiles be burnt in good Time before we want them. Petzhold.

6. Our Nail-Smith to be helped soon.

7. A Bro. to help Abrm. Andreas in hewing Plow-Wood on Geo. Gibson's Land.

8. The Girls' House Roof to be soon repaired. Bro. Tanneberger to see it done and a Tarred Cloth to be laid round where the Clock Stands on the said Roof.

The "Girls' House" here referred to, means the Bell House, then the Girls' School, and the clock was the one installed by Neisser, of Germantown, in the little turret in 1747. The bells were cast by Samuel Powell and ticked off the quarters and hours . This was the first town clock of Bethlehem.

In August, 1750, Muhlenberg made an appointment with Conrad Weiser, the famous Indian scout and surveyor, and selected Bethlehem as the place of meeting. Weiser arrived first, and told Bishop Cammerhoff of the coming of the Lutheran divine. Whereupon the good bishop hastily provided hospitality, and was ready, when Muhlenberg appeared,to offer cake and coffee at the Gemein Haus, and a pleasantly cool meeting-place in its office.

The first marriage was performed by Count Zinzendorf in the little chapel and was the marriage of the missionary Zandor, and Johanna Magdalene Mueller. The first baptism was Anna Regina, the daughter of Paul Daniel Bryzelius and his wife Regina Dorothea m. n. Schilling; these events took place in July, 1742.

The first baptism of Indians occurred on September 15. There were two of them. The first was Wanab, who was baptized by Zinzendorf and given the name of David. The second, Tassawachamen, was baptized by Buettner, and named Joshua. At the same time a white man of Oley,

who had married an Indian wife, and whom the Indians called Shebosh, was baptized by Eschenbach and given the additional name of John, his name being Joseph Bull; he became a man of great usefulness to the Moravians.

The chapel was arranged with the desk against the south wall in the center. On the wall hung a large painting of Christ bearing His cross. Connecting with it to right and left and extending as a border around the other three walls were running inscriptions in German of Zinzendorf's hymn, "The Saviour's blood and righteousness," and one of Luther's hymns. These artistic decorations greatly interested visiting Indians.

The second Christmas in Bethlehem was celebrated in this chapel. The service on Christmas Eve was celebrated the same way as in Europe, with a Love-feast lasting from 11 P. M. to 1 A. M.; the Love-feast was served at midnight. A small orchestra was used.

For nine years this chapel was in use. In May, 1749, three Greenlanders were in attendnace at a service there with converted Indians from Gnadenhuetten, all having been baptized by Moravian missionaries. Ninety-three Indians were baptized in this small chapel: Mohicans, Delawares, Wampanoogs, Mohawks, and Hoogland and Sopus Indians from New York State.

When two important Indians, Gottlieb and Mary, were baptized, it caused intense excitement among the tribes, and thirty warriors marched to Bethlehem in order to carry them back by force to the hunting grounds and religion of their fathers. But the persuasions of the couple and the kindness of the Moravians changed these angry savages into friends.

In the summer of the year 1752, two of the most powerful of the Indian tribes of Pennsylvania sent a large delegation to Bethlehem to make the acquaintance of the Moravians and see for themselves what manner of people these were who came only to preach love and bestow benefits upon the Indians.

The Nanticokes and Shawnees were the tribes represent-

ed in the embassy and as they neared Bethlehem they sent ahead a messenger bearing a string of wampum and commissioned to speak these words:

"Brother, I am near to Bethlehem and am very glad to visit it. I am not coming to treat about any particular affairs, but in order to see you.

"Everyone is glad; the chiefs are glad, the young men are glad, the women are glad and the children are glad."

As soon as this message had been received, Owen Rice, Timothy Horsfield and James Burnside went to meet the Indians on the Ohio road, down by the Manocacy. Presently they appeared on the hill, led by these men and an old chief, carrying a pipe of peace adorned with ribbons.

Bishop Spangenberg met them at the gate leading into Bethlehem and bade them welcome. In front of the Single Brethren's House stood all the brethren and boys and the musicians with their horns, playing the hymn of welcome. Wherever the Indians passed, men and women came to the doors and expressed satisfaction at their arrival, until they reached Friedenshuetten on the hill, where, in only a few hours, a few huts had been hammered together for their shelter.

The next day they assembled in the Gemein Haus chapel and formally presented a string of wampum to Bishop Spangenberg for which he thanked them in a ceremonious manner and opened "all doors wide in their welcome."

Special services were held for them, fine music performed and feasts given, and at the final meeting in the little chapel, Bishop Spangenberg showed them the Great Belt of wampum presented to Count Zinzendorf ten years before by the Onondagas. After this Brother Schlagel entered the hall bearing a large basket full of tobacco which he placed at Spangenberg's feet; while Sister Schlagel, in the name of the sisters, brought two smaller baskets filled with thread, ribbons, needles, pins, scissors and thimbles, and also gave them to the bishop for presentation.

A small company of Moravian children living up at Ma-

cungie, had desired to send as a gift their morsels of bread, but feared that it would dry out on the journey, so had procured five bushels of meal instead to be divided amongst all the Indians.

After these presentations came the real object of all the meetings, the solemn contract of friendship. The most aged chief of each tribe spoke heartily and at last, the belts of wampum held aloft, the entire company slowly marched around the reading table, singing a song of thanksgiving; thus was the embassy dismissed and returned to their tribes filled with friendship for the Moravians.

In the early summer of 1749 the third Sea Congregation arrived from Europe, with Bishop David Nitschmann and his wife, who were returning to this country.

On July 15th, 1749, thirty-one young couples who had been members of this Sea Congregation, were united in marriage in the Gemein Haus chapel. This event is spoken of as "The Great Wedding" in Bethlehem, and was celebrated by the families for many years. Some of the couples rendered missionary service, but not all, for the majority had been sent over to serve the Economy in various industries.

Another "Great Wedding" occurred in the present Old Chapel, April, 1757, when fourteen young couples were married by Bishop Spangenberg and other clergymen; but this was not the one which is now called by some people "The Missionary Wedding," that was the one which took place in the Gemein Haus.

Bishop Nitschmann lived here, and Spangenberg, Cammerhoff, Seidel and Ettwein here had their residence. The various distinguished visitors to the town here called upon the church officials; the administration room, or "office," was the room at present occupied by Mrs. Trauger, first floor, and first door on the right as you enter the west door on Church Street.

The building became so over-crowded, dwelling, school, administration, worship, hospital, etc., that steps were taken to build a real church. These plans were rushed

through, and in the forenoon of July 10, 1751, the last Love-feast was held in the Gemein Haus chapel, for the children. After the service the formed in procession for the march to the new church, our present "Old Chapel." That whole day was one of prayer and thanksgiving for the beautiful New Chapel.

The first chapel, always called Der Saal by the early Moravians, thereafter to be known as the kleine Saal, continued to be used for occasional services until the south half was partitioned off into dwelling rooms. Then the northern half, where Mrs. Schlosser and Mrs. Gangawere now have their rooms, was called Das Saalchen, a little hall, and used for private religious meetings and betrothals.

The house was fearfully overcrowded through the Revolution. All of the important business of the war was transacted in the little office on the first floor, and small conferences and groups met there to discuss ways and means, just as in the first few years, the Haus-Conferenz had met there on the Sabbath to lay out the work for the ensuing week. In 1777 orders came from the General Staff to vacate the old Family House, or Nursery, on Main Street, to accommodate the British prisoners who were to be quartered here. Hans Christian von Schweinitz, administrator of the Moravian Estates, was then living in the Family House, and was compelled by these orders to move into the Gemein Haus. He occupied the first floor rooms which now look out on the green, and the room which communicated with the office.

During the Revolution a sneak-thief got into the Gemein Haus and made off with some of the clothing that was stored in the great clothes chests that stood in the halls. He forced his way past the guard at the door, entered and made off with his booty before the astonished man could give the alarm. Bishop Ettwein heard the racket and rushed after the fugitive when the alarm was raised. The thief dropped the clothing and ran for his life. He was permitted to escape and the clothing was replaced in the clothes press.

In 1796 Mrs. Spengler's present rooms were occupied by Jacob Van Vleck, principal of the Girls' School. During the Civil War period Mrs. Lydia Rice lived in these rooms.

Jeremiah Denke, the Gemeinhelfer, or principal pastor, in 1796 occupied the rooms we have known so long as the Mission Rooms, and which were Zinzendorf's lodgings in 1741, and Augustus Klingsohr had the rooms on the second floor, middle part, which were the first private rooms partitioned off from the old Saal. Later, the Rev. Peter Ricksecker occupied one of the private rooms created out of the northern half of the old Saal, and Mrs. Rose, the other room.

On the first floor, where Mrs. Schlosser now has the kitchen, there lived the first miller, once a missionary to the Indians, John George Jungmann, who was spending his last years in retirement. The room in front of his was the office, adjoining the von Schweinitz apartments.

The apartment on the first floor back of the eastern staircase, now Louisa Stephan's room, was the vestry room, from which the clergy passed in procession to the service.

The second floor, at the east end, contained dwelling rooms, one of which was later made into the present vestry room. That room, and the corner room were the apartments of Bishop Ettwein; in more recent years they were occupied by Mrs. Angelica Lehman and later by Mrs. Reuben Luckenbach. The little middle room with an inside window, was the robing room for the clergy; on the garret at the east end were the Archives.

The dining room for married people was in the basement, west end, entered from Church Street; the old door is still there, the barn-door type, cut across in the middle, concealed by the present porch. Within, a handmade iron spice grinder is still attached to a door-jamb. The vegetable cellar, cold with an earthen chill and flagged with stone, is quite dark, and is under Mrs. Schlosser's kitchen.

All of the lower floors in the Gemein Haus are either bricked, or flagged; the woodwork is hand-hewn and dovetailed; the iron hinges and oven doors are hand-wrought

and worn with age. Occasionally, when the halls are done over the ancient logs and their plastering are exposed, true and sound as the day they were laid.

In the summer of 1868 the old house was completely renovated, "to the satisfaction of its inmates," thus said Bishop de Schweinitz, "but the sorrow of all antiquaries. It now presents the appearance of a common tenement house cased in painted boards."

Previous to this change the house had been covered with stucco applied on lath. It did not wear well due to the breakage on account of frost, and therefore it was decided to remove it and protect the old logs with weather-boarding. The stucco was probably applied at the time the church was covered with the "fashionable German plaster," but it has held better on the stone church than on the log house.

Here in this old house, called the Great House on the Hill by the Indians who passed up and down the river in their canoes, centered all the activities of pioneer life, church and civic. Colonial governors, John Penn, Hamilton and Denny, passed through its portals; Revolutionary statesmen and officers, Gen. Gates and Gen. Sullivan, Lafayette, Pulaski, are only a few of those who visited the log house; and the greatest of all, George Washington, was there entertained by Bishop Ettwein. Conrad Weiser, Nicholas Scull, Cornplanter, Red Jacket, Tedyuscung and innumerable other Indians,—all these historic characters are woven into the memories of the Gemein Haus.

It is one of the historic shrines of Pennsylvania; not a mansion like the Chew House and many others; but a primitive log house in the wilderness, hallowed by the great men who visited it, and by the consecrated lives of the men and women who dwelt within it. "The glory of the children is their fathers—behold our heritage from them."